



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Article

Title: David Cameron and multiculturalism: reproducing the new orthodoxy

Creator: Pilkington, A.

Example citation: Pilkington, A. (2011) David Cameron and multiculturalism: reproducing the new orthodoxy. *Social Science Teacher*. **40**(3), pp. 22-25. 2043-8931.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/3712/>



David Cameron and Multiculturalism: Reproducing the New Orthodoxy

Professor Andrew Pilkington, University of Northampton, UK

The dominant discourse on race and ethnicity in Britain has undergone a significant shift in the last twelve years. The advent of a New Labour government in 1997 signalled a renewed concern with egalitarianism and for a short period promised to inaugurate a new era whereby Britain was at last prepared to take serious steps to combat racism and promote race equality. In its first year of government, New Labour commissioned an official inquiry, chaired by a senior judge, Sir William Macpherson, into the police investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager, by five white youths in 1993. Although the primary focus of the inquiry was on the police, the report suggested that all major organisations in British society were characterised by institutional racism. The Macpherson report (1999), and its charge that major organisations were infused by institutional racism, was at first widely accepted across the political spectrum and led, among other things, to a much more proactive approach to promoting race equality, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. The same year saw the publication of the Parekh Report, a major report of an independent commission on the future of multi-ethnic Britain chaired by Lord Parekh, a report which highlighted the importance of creating a multicultural society which struck a balance between the need to treat people equally, the need to respect differences and the need to maintain social cohesion, and which argued that this needed to be done within a human rights framework (Parekh, 2000).

While there were always some dissenting voices, throughout 1999 and much of 2000 the dominant discourse was a progressive one. There was an explicit commitment to egalitarianism, a genuine concern to combat racism, an espousal of multiculturalism and a concern to create a more inclusive representation of the nation. What I have called the radical hour did not, however, last long (Pilkington, 2008a).

The backlash, already evident in the media reaction to the Parekh report, has steadily gained strength. The concept of institutional racism has been cast into the dustbin and multiculturalism has been castigated rather than celebrated as concerns over Islamic terrorism and rising net migration have taken precedence over issues to do with racism. Fast forward from February 1999, when the Macpherson report was published and its recommendations fully accepted by the government, to February 2011.

The Cameron speech

Here is David Cameron, the Prime Minister, speaking in Munich:

'Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream...We

have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values. All this leaves some young Muslims feeling rootless. And the search for something to belong to and believe in can lead them to

extremist ideology [which in turn can lead to terrorism]... When a white person holds objectionable views – racism for example- we rightly condemn them but when equally unacceptable views or practices have come from someone who isn't white we've been too cautious, frankly too fearful, to stand up to them...This has led to the failure of some to confront the horrors of forced marriage' (Cameron, 2011a).

This speech was heralded as a radical departure from the orthodoxy of previous post-war governments. This can be gleaned from the headlines of most British newspapers the day after his speech:

Muslims must embrace core British values, says Cameron. The days of doing deals with Muslim extremists are over (Telegraph)

PM: Tougher stand on extremism (Mirror)

Cameron: My war on multiculturalism (Independent)

Softies stoked terrorism. Zero tolerance for Muslim extremists (Sun)

Cameron: Its time to stop tolerating the Islamic extremists (Mail)

Multiculturalism has failed us: It's time for muscular liberalism says Cameron (Times)

Cameron tells Muslim Britain: Stop tolerating extremists. PM says those who don't hold British values will be shunned by government (Guardian)

A number of themes are evident in this coverage: the failure of multiculturalism; the danger of Islamic extremism; and the need to reassert Britishness. In most cases, a series of binary oppositions are repeated: us/them; British/Muslim; moderate/extremist. Most newspapers presented Cameron's speech in a sympathetic light, with the only critical editorial and commentary being in the Guardian. The coverage drew upon old themes evident for example in the media reaction to the Parekh report when multiculturalism was questioned and nationalism promoted (Pilkington, 2009); the repeated refrain of political correctness gone mad (Pilkington, 2008b); and the employment of a framework for coverage of British Muslims focusing on Muslims being a threat (in relation to terrorism) or a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general) (Moore et al, 2008).

But how radical was Cameron's position on multiculturalism? And how valid are the arguments marshalled against multiculturalism?

How radical is Cameron's critique?

The first point that needs to be made is that Cameron's intervention draws upon earlier critiques of multiculturalism, especially those mounted in the previous decade. Multiculturalism in the UK has only been an integral ingredient in the dominant discourse on race and ethnicity at particular points in time in the post-war period and has been steadily on the retreat since 2001. While Cameron's speech was presented as a radical departure from the dominant discourse on race and ethnicity, he was in fact reproducing elements of the dominant discourse which have developed since 2001.

The co-ordinated attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001 helped to consolidate an emerging discourse, evident earlier in the official response to the Northern riots in 2001, that saw institutional racism as less significant than the threat of Muslim disorder/terrorism and identified the central issue as that of cultural integration. If the responses to terrorism and disorder in 2001 signalled a de-prioritisation of equality as a central policy objective, mounting attacks on multiculturalism since that time indicate that diversity is no longer something to be celebrated. By 2004, it was already common to read or hear that the cultural separatism and self-segregation of Muslim migrants represented a challenge to Britishness and that a "politically correct" multiculturalism had fostered fragmentation rather than integration' (Modood, 2005).

In the post-war period, Britain has been more sympathetic to the notion of multicultural citizenship than its European neighbours, Germany and France, and thus more accommodating to the concerns of minority ethnic communities (Castles, 1995). We must not, however, overstate Britain's commitment to multicultural citizenship, which has always been more tentative than that of Canada. It has also by no means been without contradiction, with the trajectory of its immigration policy in the post-war period becoming more exclusionary and racially biased (Kymlika, 2003).

What is more, multiculturalism has always been highly contested in Britain (Pilkington, 2003 and 2005). While proponents have highlighted the importance of publicly recognising and respecting identities that are important to people, critics from the left have tended to identify it as a mode of social control, which neglects racism and wider social inequality, and critics on the right have tended to worry about its purported threat to national culture. The onslaught on multiculturalism since 2004 has taken on a somewhat different form, with those who would describe themselves as progressive social democrats not only taking the lead but also mounting arguments that resonated across the political spectrum, arguments that Cameron regurgitates.

Two highly influential critiques were put forward by David Goodhart (2004), the editor of *Prospect* and Trevor Phillips (2004), the chair at the time of the Commission for Racial Equality. For Goodhart what is problematic is the multicultural itself, notably ethnic diversity. Since too much diversity erodes solidarity, 'it is important to reassure the majority that the system of entering the country and becoming a citizen is under control'. Goodhart applauds David Blunkett, the Home Secretary for grasping the nettle in recognising both the need to control the rate of immigration and 'the need for more integration of some immigrant communities – especially Muslim ones' (Goodhart, 2004). In Cameron's February speech, the focus is not on the multicultural, but in a subsequent speech in April he highlighted the importance of 'controlling immigration and bringing it down' and warned that immigrants unable to speak English or to integrate have created 'a kind of discomfort and disjointedness' which has disrupted communities (Cameron, 2011b). The multicultural is here seen as problematic in exactly the same way identified by Goodhart and acknowledged by Blunkett. Nothing original here.

For Phillips, by contrast, what is problematic is not the multicultural itself but multiculturalism, the (or at least some of the) policies that entail 'some level of public recognition and support for...minorities to maintain and express their distinct identities and practices' (Banting and Kymlika, 2006: 1). We are in danger, as he puts it in a famous sound bite of 'sleep walking to segregation'. We must wake up and reject multiculturalism, which he depicts as entailing separateness between communities. What is needed instead is race equality and the adoption of common values (Phillips, 2004).

What is noticeable is that same two arguments are typically marshalled to challenge multiculturalism. O'Donnell (2007: 253-254) outlines them well when he presents the case that multiculturalism threatens social solidarity. The first criticism of multiculturalism is that it overemphasises differences between people and thus obscures communalities. It is in short divisive and thus corrosive of social cohesion. The second criticism of multiculturalism is its valorisation of political correctness. Political correctness has stifled freedom of expression, inhibited open cross-cultural dialogue and made us reluctant to defend our values. This situation entails a 'threat to social solidarity'. These are of course exactly the same two arguments presented by Cameron. Nothing original here.

How valid are Cameron's arguments?

Let me address both the critiques of the multicultural and multiculturalism. I shall deal with the first very quickly. A comprehensive survey of 21 European countries indicated that rising ethnic diversity did not have a detrimental effect on social cohesion. 'In short, there is no evidence that diversity is undermining social cohesion and European welfare states' (Legrain, 2011). But what about multiculturalism, the focus of Cameron's February speech?

Let me deal with each of his criticisms in turn [see also Pilkington (2007)]. We can distinguish, following Miller (2006) a moderate and radical conception of

multiculturalism. A moderate conception sees policies that recognise and accommodate minority identities (for example being Muslim) as working in tandem with policies that promote a national identity that embraces these distinct identities (for example being British). A radical conception by contrast believes that it is unnecessary for policies that acknowledge different identities to be accompanied by others that seek to inculcate an overarching national identity. While multiculturalism does of course have divergent meanings and takes different forms, it is exceptional for proponents not to highlight the need for respect for difference to be complemented by adherence to some common values and indeed 'no country in the West has adopted radical multiculturalism' (Banting and Kymlika, 2006: 40). What is being attacked here is a straw man.

It is difficult not to resist the temptation to see multiculturalism as an easy scapegoat for concerns about disorder and terrorism. Multiculturalism cannot seriously be seen as causing segregation since segregation predates the heyday of multiculturalism and is in fact declining (Finney and Simpson, 2009). And multiculturalism cannot seriously be seen as responsible for Islamic radicalism since the latter can also be found in France which has expressly rejected multiculturalism .

Let us turn to the other criticism Cameron makes of multiculturalism, the purported association of multiculturalism with political correctness. It is true that legislative changes have been accompanied by normative changes about what is acceptable to say and publish. References to niggers and Pakis are now generally unacceptable. This is on the whole, as I am sure Cameron would agree, a positive development. We can scarcely urge Muslims and other minority groups to integrate if we are insulting them. For Cameron, however, these normative changes have gone too far and have resulted in political correctness, with images conjured up of the thought police cajoling us to stay in tune with the latest party line. Labelling attempts to be sensitive in the way we address and represent people as political correctness, however, is to fall prey to a right wing discourse which turns the world upside down. The problem is not the stereotyping, stigmatising and marginalising of vulnerable groups, but PC zealots who threaten freedom of speech. It is remarkable that this discourse has become so pervasive. The vitriol thrown at multiculturalism, and indeed the current demonisation of Muslims, by large sections of the media scarcely indicate an intimidated press. I would suggest that what such coverage indicates instead is the hegemonic position of a right wing anti-PC discourse (Pilkington, 2008b). The purported dominance of political correctness, and accompanying moral relativism that inhibits criticism of practices such as forced marriage, is clearly contradicted by the fact that people are not reluctant to make moral judgements about these practices (Parekh, 2000). Cameron in short criticises a version of multiculturalism that advocates do not advance and indeed has not been institutionalised in policies.

Contrary to Cameron's view that multiculturalism undermines social cohesion, I concur with Modood (2005) when he argues that 'multiculturalism is still an

attractive and worthwhile political project; and indeed we need more of it rather than less'. Multiculturalism for Modood is a form of integration. It entails changes on the part of established institutions as well as minority groups in a process of mutual accommodation. What is crucial in the current context is that British Muslims are represented in the public sphere, that there is genuine dialogue, that pragmatic and mutual adjustments are made and that over time we move towards a situation where, irrespective of difference, people experience equal respect. What is especially damaging to multiculturalism are ideologies that represent the social world in terms of a simple binary opposition, the West/Islam whereby people are divided into two mutually exclusive categories. While Islamophobia and Islamist ideologies comprise mirror images of each other, neither are 'conducive to fostering dialogue, respect for difference, to seeking common ground and negotiated accommodation, in short to citizenship in general and above all to multicultural citizenship' (Modood, 2007: 130).

The media may have presented Cameron's speech as radical. But a discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society has been on the retreat since 2001 and in its stead a nationalist discourse from different sides of the political spectrum has been revived (West, 2005; Goodhart, 2006), a discourse which highlights community cohesion, emphasises Britishness and urges Muslims to integrate (Modood, 2007). This discourse is not unique to Britain and indeed Cameron's speech bore an uncanny resemblance to an earlier speech by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel in October, 2010 and a later speech by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy in February 2011. There seems little doubt that centre right politicians are trying to shore up support on the right at a time of declining popularity, increasing concern over immigration and the rising appeal of far right parties. Multiculturalism here comprises a free floating signifier, signalling unease with immigrants and Muslims.

Summary

In this short paper, I have been concerned to show how anxiety about Islamic terrorism (and increased net migration) has led to multiculturalism being attacked. The recent attacks epitomised by Cameron's speech, however, draw on old arguments and attack a straw man. These arguments attack a radical conception of multiculturalism which is neither advocated by proponents nor institutionalised in policies (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). The danger of these attacks is that we cease to value diversity, do not engage Muslims in dialogue and Britain's incorporation policies shift away from pluralism and multicultural citizenship towards assimilationism and differential exclusion (Castles, 1995). We need to find an appropriate balance, as the Parekh report argued between equality, diversity and social cohesion. That means in the current political context, contrary to Cameron, placing more rather than less stress on equality and diversity.

Bibliography

- Banting, K. and Kymlika, W. (eds) (2006) *Multiculturalism and the Welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, D. (2011a) 'PM's speech at Munich Security Conference' www.number10.gov.uk/news/speech (last accessed 5 may, 2011)
- Cameron, D. (2011b) 'Cameron Raises Stakes in Debate on Immigration', *The Times*, April 14
- Castles, S. (1995) 'How Nation-States Respond to Immigration and Ethnic Diversity', *New Community*, 21 (3)
- Finney, N & Simpson, L (2009) *'Sleepwalking to Segregation'?* Bristol, Policy Press.
- Goodhart, D. (2004) 'Discomfort of Strangers', *The Guardian*, February 24
- Goodhart, D. (2006) *Progressive Nationalism*, London: Demos.
- Kymlika, W. (2003) 'Immigration, Citizenship, Multiculturalism: Exploring the Links', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.74, No.1
- Legrain, P. (2011) 'Progressives Should Embrace Diversity' in M. McTernan (ed) *Exploring the Cultural Challenges to Social Democracy*, Policy Network
- Macpherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, London, Stationary Office.
- Miller, D. (2006) Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Theoretical Reflections', in K. Banting and W. Kymlika (eds) (2006) (eds) *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Modood, T (2005) 'Remaking Multiculturalism After 7/7', *openDemocracy*, 29 September
- Modood, T. (2007) *Multiculturalism*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Moore, K., Mason, P. & Lewis, J. (2008) Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National News Print Media, 2000-2008, Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies
- O'Donnell, M. (2007) 'We Need Human Rights Not Nationalism "Lite": Globalisation and British Solidarity', *Ethnicities*, Vol. 7, No.2
- Parekh, B. (2000) *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, London: Profile.
- Phillips, T. (2004) 'Multiculturalism's Legacy is "Have a Nice Day" Racism', *The Guardian*, May 28

Pilkington, A. (2003) *Racial Disadvantage and Ethnic Diversity in Britain*, Basingstoke, Palgrave

Pilkington, A. (2005) 'Social Cohesion, Racial Equality and Ethnic Diversity' in M. Holborn (ed) *Developments in Sociology*, Volume 21, Ormskirk: Causeway Press

Pilkington, A. (2007) 'In Defence of both Multiculturalism and Progressive Nationalism: A Response to Mike O'Donnell, *Ethnicities*, Vol. 7, No.2.

Pilkington, A (2008a) 'From Institutional Racism to Community Cohesion: The Changing Nature of Racial Discourse', *Sociological Research Online*, Vol.13, No.3.

Pilkington, A. (2008b) 'Beyond Political Correctness? *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, Vol.2, Issue 4.

Pilkington, A (2009) 'New Labour and the New Integrationism' in A. Pilkington, S. Housee & K. Hylton (eds) *Race(ing) Forward: Transitions in Theorising "Race" in Education*, Birmingham, Higher Education Academy.

Vertovec, S and Wessendorf (2010) *The Multiculturalism Backlash*, London, Routledge

West, P. (2005) *The Poverty of Multiculturalism*, London: Civitas.